

DRUGS AND THE DHARMA

June 2, 2013

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

I should know better than to talk about drugs and the dharma (and I usually don't) in the same sentence. Encouraging drug use is not my intention. And it would seem that there really is no obvious link between drugs and the dharma in this country. However, there is one indirect link that to me it is very interesting, and worth risking a discussion.

In my experience drugs are not per-se dharmic, with one exception, LSD. And, although they may not be popular, here are my thoughts:

For me the direct results of LSD had to do with the nature of the mind and how it worked. When acid came on the scene in the early 1960s, it was not just another fun high like marijuana. It struck at the core of the 1950's fixed mentality and split it wide open. The genie was out of the bottle.

It is a testimony to the universality of the truth of the dharma that it does not have to come in a Tibetan or Japanese wrapper. Rather, the dharma is like the laws of nature, right up there with gravity and sunshine. It just is. We don't break the laws of nature; they break us. It is the same with the dharma. We work with it and not against it.

When LSD came along and laid bare some of the internal workings of the mind, that was my first real dharma lesson. Like a mental tsunami, acid left in its wake chaos and instability, but also insights and clarity for many of us at that first taste. And it certainly did not have the name of dharma stamped on it, but it was very dharmic.

And when almost a decade later great dharma masters like Chögyam Trungpa came along, they made quick work of our acid trips. It suddenly all made sense. And unlike those of us with acid experience, where we might have this insight right but had no idea where it fit into the overall scheme of life, the dharma had a place for it. Everything we saw in the light of LSD fit together with the dharma teachings like plugging a piece into a jigsaw puzzle.

I had been to the brightest minds I knew (like the Catholic Jesuits) and shared my acid experience asking for an explanation, but they did not have a clue. "Have faith," was about all they said. With my LSD experiences I had somehow ventured beyond the pale of society's consensus and into uncharted waters, territory usually reserved for shamans and those who find themselves in alternate realities and states of mind. I was a voice crying in the wilderness and there were suddenly millions of us. We could not really sort it out. What we were seeing was just too different. Like the dharma, it was a wakeup call.

When the great dharma teacher Chögyam Trungpa came on the scene in the early 1970s all

that changed. He was totally at home with whatever we had come across in the mind on acid and never blinked. In fact, it is reputed that Trungpa once took LSD and his only comment was "Nothing happened!" Not only was acid not a challenge to Trungpa, but he was able to show people like myself how each insight into the nature of the mind that LSD had given us fit into an overall approach to training the mind.

Everything my generation could throw at Trungpa just became more grist for his mill. Believe me friends, THAT was impressive and he immediately tamed thousands of us who had fallen into the scary habit of thinking that we must be the Lone Ranger and somehow unique because of our LSD experiences. Trungpa could settle that question with a simple comment. Nothing we saw in the mind was news to him. Out of the chaos of our acid experiences Trungpa made order. And we just got in line.

What we had seen on acid was the truth or part of it. Like a piece of a puzzle, we had no idea where this or that insight fit in. Trungpa showed how all our pieces fit into the larger picture and we got it. At least in my case, these two powers changed my life, first LSD, and then Trungpa, who helped make sense of it all.

I tell this story because it explains my ambivalence when it comes to drugs. I never got much out of any drugs (except some entertainment), with the exception of LSD. But I would be a liar if I denied that I learned an inestimable amount from taking that drug.

That being said, I should hasten to point out that I sincerely believe that acid was useful at a particular time in history when the fixed dichotomy of the current thinking of the time needed some air, and acid was a shortcut to the future. It paved the way for what we call the 1960s and, IMO, was the principle catalyst for that revolution. Nothing else came close.

And that fact that what we saw on LSD turned out to be part of the dharma is a testimony to its truth and universality. Thank goodness that the Tibetans, driven out of their own country, wandered into America and showed us where the pieces of the puzzle of the mind that we saw on acid fit. Once I found the dharma, drugs no longer interested me.

SOME ELABORATION

I would be surprised if many readers know how much of our worldview is embedded in what we call the self and its perspective. I had little to no idea that what we see out there in the world is very much what we project from our mind in here. We are brought up to believe that what we see in the world around us is objective fact, simply the way things are, the way it is.

I had my first clue that I had it pretty-much backward on May 6, 1964 while I was living in Berkeley California and I had just dropped LSD for the first time. And acid was so new back then that what I took was some from the original Sandoz Laboratories in Switzerland. No need to describe my whole trip or to warn you off from running out and taking LSD today. That was then and this is now. For one, acid has changed and the need and the times for it have really

changed, but back then LSD was a segue into a new time for an entire generation.

My point here is, aside from literally blowing my mind, the main take-away from that acid trip was the realization that much of what I see out there in the world is what I project from deep in here. I don't mean that I just understand it as a concept, but rather that it was then that I realized in real-time my mind's projections. I will give one clear example.

Back then we had mostly heard stories of acid and few had yet experienced it. The rumor was that LSD was anything you thought it was, which turned out to be more-or-less true.

Despite my attempts to make sure I was in a secure location when I dropped acid, I was not. I made the person who was chaperoning me promise that no matter what I said to the contrary, she would not leave me alone. I was afraid what I might do. Clear enough? Yet, the first time I told her I was fine and that she should go, she split. Bam! My influence with her was just too strong. She just believed me!

Anyway, there I was, totally immersed in the phantasmagoria of an acid trip and loose on the streets of Berkeley California very late at night. As I passed a dark alley I could hear laughter. And as I peered into the darkness I could see someone coming toward me. It was a black couple. They were drunk and kind of stumbling in my direction. I could see that the woman was leaning into the man and clinging to his waist. I was apprehensive because back then blacks and prejudice went hand-in-hand. I drew back.

Then the couple emerged into the streetlight at the end of the alley and they were white! Not only were they white, they were just a couple of college kids out on a date. What was I to think about that?

What I thought was that in the quick-silver speed of acid I had somehow intercepted my ingrained prejudice and in that slow-motion time that LSD can provide, I could suddenly see the wizard behind the curtain, perhaps more like an idiot. As mentioned earlier, this was not a thought or an understanding. This was a real-time living movie that I was in and I had just stepped behind the curtain of the self for the very first time. My bias, prejudice, and ingrained reaction were suddenly out of the bag and obvious to me.

I had actually caught myself in a contradiction and seen for the first time that the world I lived in was a movie screen upon which I projected what I had learned or been taught to project, all my likes, dislikes, biases, and prejudice. I was stunned. Wow!

And the whole acid trip that night was like that. In that LSD experience I awoke to real-time psychology. I was suddenly a player within my own mind, and no longer just an onlooker. From that day forward I was a full-time phenomenologist. I had stepped behind the curtain of the self where the projector is located and was soon fiddling with the gears. I was never the same again, and that is good thing.

In the crew-cut strait-jacket world of the 1950s from which I was emerging, I (and everyone I knew) was wrapped way too tight to have any real kind of life. The whole society was similarly frozen, staring at the same locked-step movie that I had just stepped out of. Imagine that!

And I was not alone. My whole generation soon joined me and we stepped through the back of the mirror together and then down the rabbit hole without as much as a goodbye to the status quo. It was total freedom compared to where we came from. We finally understood... something.

Of course, it is not quite that simple. What I saw on acid took me years to absorb and even longer to stabilize, which is why I don't recommend drugs.

Anyway, dharma practice can do the same thing and without the dangers and need to stabilize. But back in 1964, dharma in America had not reached so far as Ann Arbor Michigan, at least not in a form that I could assimilate.

It was then that I began to study my own reactions in earnest. And they were not few, but many. It appeared that I reacted to almost anything and all the time. My personal likes and dislikes filtered almost everything I experienced, and it was not like my tastes were something special. The net effect was that I was looking through prescription eyeglasses that were anything but rose-colored. Pure, unfiltered experience was almost not on my menu. I was a creature not only of habit, but of bias and prejudice, slammed against the walls of the mind by my every passing reaction. And until I began to develop some awareness of all this, I never even knew this was happening.

The social mind that emerged from the 1950s was pretty much airtight. Those my age that I knew had no clue either. All of this started to loosen up in the early 1960s, in my opinion largely because of the advent of LSD. That may not be a popular observation, but to the best of my experience it is the truth. Acid exposed the unity of the observer and the observed to most of a generation. We began to witness our own projections and in particular the fact that the strict dichotomy of the subject and the object was not true. It was the Heisenberg principle incarnate, the fact that the state of our mind directly influences what we see and believe is out there in the external world. LSD unhinged an entire generation and the door of the mind blew wide.

Suddenly there was lot's to do. Watching the kaleidoscope of the mind reveal its secrets one by one was riveting. The concrete iceberg of who knows how many previous generations was melting and breaking up, a chunk at a time. And whatever spirit had been trapped in that frozen state was freed and lived again. Suddenly it was the Sixties.

So even before the dharma poured into this country, it was already at work here. When great teachers like Chögyam Trungpa arrived on the scene, they just showed us how to do it properly, practice methods that really work. However, the mind was already waking up even before that.

CODA: DRUGS AND THE DHARMA

June 2, 2013

Since I see there are some interested in this topic, I will add a little more.

If I had found what I was looking for in LSD, I would still be doing it. Instead what I found interesting in glimpses from acid was what the dharma is all about 24x7, so I picked up on the dharma and have been doing it ever since.

The essence of my acid trips was insight into the workings of the mind and how to de-program the scripts that society had blindly embedded in my brain. It turned out that the dharma was not only about the same thing I saw on LSD, but all of its methods were designed to do exactly what I did not know how to do on my own. The dharma is a path or method for enlightened awareness, and from what little I know of that state, this is where I want to be.

The drama and power of LSD is mind shattering, but the time it takes to put that shattered mind back into stable form takes much longer than the slow and steady practice of dharma. I tried to put the acid puzzle together, but there were too many missing pieces and half-truths. I could not make a whole picture by myself. The dharma turns out to be an integrated path that includes all of the pieces I knew of from LSD, plus those that I never figured out by myself, and they make a complete image.

There is a part of me that does not like to follow the leader, follow orders, get in line, and or in any way take anything from "others." I have always been self-taught and walked out of high school never to return. I was a maverick; some would even say a rogue. I was shunned by society for not following the rules, but sustained by a few caring teachers of life.

It is a sign of the power of the dharma that a great dharma teacher single-handedly subdued those rebellious tendencies in me and, in a word, tamed me, at the same time making me of some possible use to others.

My acid experiences were most precious to me, the only chinks in the armor of society where light shone through, and I carried them like a parched man carries water in his hands thinking that was all there was.

An analogy I share with myself is of a thirsty man crawling across the desert that comes to some green leaves with a few drops of water on them. I would have stayed right there scrounging for water drops, when by going only a little farther was an oasis and a fathomless pool of water. The dharma gave me the tools to reach the oasis and all the water I care to drink.

I have had some of the rough corners rounded off of me by my dharma training, corners that only hurt myself and any others I came in contact with. I can't say that my dharma path has

always been easy, but because it actually works, it is far easier than any other route I am aware of.

I am not a religious man and I don't consider the dharma a religion like the Catholicism I was raised in. So, kind of late in life, all I really care about is learning and practicing the dharma, and doing my very best to share it with others who, like I was, are still trying to carry water in their hands. I probably have limited compassion, but I do have compassion for those folks like me who are searching for awareness.

And I appreciate those of you here who share some of the same experience.

[Photo by me of the Mahasiddha Tilopa, one of my heroes.]



